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ABSTRACT

Writing across the Curriculum (WAC) has been urged and tried by some of the best teachers and scholars of the past in ways similar to those of today's advocates and practitioners. WAC programs have staked their claims that writing is essential to learning; that it is necessary to write in order for students to see before them the words that reflect their thinking and knowledge. Under a Ford Foundation grant the University of Oklahoma has made a concerted effort to help faculty focus on issues of illiteracy and to devise ways of eliminating it. Using the Ford Foundation definition of literacy, a two-year pilot plan was set up to involve faculty in finding solutions to problems identified by faculty members themselves. Under phase 1 of the project, two pilot programs were created which used a variety of techniques, all concerned with components of literacy. Phase 2 consisted of reporting to a larger group of faculty who attended workshops for additional training. Phase 3 will consist of the faculty implementing their ideas in their classrooms. At the same time new general education requirements will be phased into the undergraduate education program. The overall goal of this work on literacy is to improve undergraduate education by promoting fundamental learning activities that all faculty members can use. What institutions need are faculty members in every department who are aware of these fundamental ways of learning and of shaping the way world views are thought about and created. (An appendix provides sample assignments.) (MG)

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WAC and Literacy at the University of Oklahoma: Constructing a Reality Takes More Than Writing

At the turn of the century the Co-operative movement, as David Russell calls it, tried to revitalize education in all subjects through writing. The people involved believed that writing was an excellent way for students to learn. Not only was it a way to learn whatever particular disciplines had to offer, but writing was also seen as a way for students to integrate the variety of experiences from all disciplines and from life. Champions of writing wrote dozens and dozens of articles urging educators not to restrict writing to English classes. They wanted schools and universities to follow the European model where writing was used in all disciplines for learning, exams, and advancement. A few universities (e.g. Columbia, Colgate, Wisconsin, Chicago, etc.) in the 30's adopted programs that used "co-operative" methods that required students to write in most of their classes. But the momentum of this movement was haulted by the Second World War and the subsequent flood of veterans that poured into colleges and universities at the war's end. But those who believed writing was vital to learning were not vanquished so easily. David R. Russell points out in his article "Writing across the Curriculum and the Communications Movement: Some Lessons from the Past" (CCC, May 1987) that attempts were again made in the late 40's and 50's to make writing a central activity in the whole university. Colgate (1949-1961) and the University of California at Berkeley (1950-1965), had programs similar to some present-day WAC programs. But these programs like many others from the same period succumed to pressures similar to those that are at work today and that threatened the "new" WAC movement.

A look at our history shows that similar forces dealt the "correlated curriculum" movement its death blow after its hayday in the 30's when national, state, and local organizations and institutions saw it as the key to improved learning. The "core curriculum" had promised to bring together "traditionally disparate" disciplines and promised to integrate writing (along with reading and computational skills) into the curriculum--writing would truly be across the curriculum and students would thereby learn better. But by 1949 only a little over 3% of the high schools and junior highs offered a "core," and the "core" in colleges and universities met the same end in the 60's as solipsism replaced the confident objectivism of earlier periods (Russell).

So WAC has been urged and tried by some of the best teachers and scholars of the past in ways similar to today's advocates and practitioners. In all its guises it has made the same theoretical claims that Catherine Pastore Blair outlines in an opinion piece in College English (April, 1988):

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> [WAC's] first premise is that we create the world we live in through language, an idea that has been with us at least since the Romantics and a commonplace of our present world view, providing the foundation of such fields as socio-linguistic literary criticism, social construction, and the new sociology of education. It is implicit in Kenneth Burke's definition of the human being as the symbol-using animal creating experience through symbol manipulation..., and in V.N. Voloshinov's statement that "there is no such thing as experience outside the embodiment in signs.... In short, most of us now believe that through language we create what we variously call our experience, our context, or our knowledge (383).

It's obvious from such a theory that knowledge and language go together; they are inseparable. It is on this basis that WAC programs have steaked their claims that writing is essential to learning; that it is necessary to write in order for students to see in front of them the words that reflect their thinking and their knowledge. In writing words stay in front of us and our students. We cannot hide from what we have written. What we write becomes material that we can shape, add to, cut, shove around, reshape until it represents what we think and know. Through writing and other thinking activities we restructure received knowledge and experiences and feelings until they are ours--until we can say we know this or that.

But is writing the only way we learn? Obviously not. No sane WAC proponent, no matter how committed would claim all of learning for writing. But frequently in the discussion of WAC programs the other ways we learn are barely mentioned. This insularity I think reflects the larger insularity noted by many (i.e Fulwiler, Russell, etc.) in criticizing why WAC programs meet resistance in the modern university. Anyone who has worked in a WAC program sees immediately the problems of turf, resistance, and the threat caused by emphasizing (even if only momentarily) teaching concerns and student learning concerns over research and departmental specialization. Those living in the insular university resist remaking it into a cross-curricular enterprise where small areas of the "superior"/specialized knowledge of a few (faculty) become secondary to the task of the serious intellectual engagement of the many--that is helping students restructure and internalize worlds of knowledge and meaning for themselves through writing--and other activities.

So the insularity noted by WAC commentators in the larger, discipline oriented, departmentalized university does not seem to disappear when WAC proponents crusade for WAC programs. WAC proponents often seem as insular as the university communities they attack. A cursory reading of reports on WAC programs shows clearly that the writing establishment is frequently narrow in its focus on ways to improve learning--often it is implied that writing is the only answer. I know such an implication is not intentional, but WAC proponents get so absorbed in their mission to get students writing that they lose sight of the fact that

writing is not the only answer to better learning; it is one of many activities that help us know the world through language--it is one way we create "our experience, our context, ...our knowledge." Writing is embedded in a host of other activities and forces that give rise to the language that helps us shape our view of the world. As long as WAC proponents isolate themselves from broader learning/language concerns, they can be sure that their programs and their movement will suffer the fate of other narrowly focused movements of the past. They will be tossed aside, and all their effort will go in the history ledger on the side of well-meaning, failed "experiments"--just more romantic residue in the history of education.

No one who is part of WAC wants it to go the way of the "co-operative" movement, the "core" curriculum or the "experiments" of the 50's and 60's. Writing is a key activity to learning, but so are collaboration, critical thinking, oral communication, and reading--all activities that contribute to literacy, a literacy that puts learning/language at the center of intellectual life, and not just writing which is only one component. We distort what it means to learn when we ride any one educational hobbyhorse, and we doom ourselves to failure when we do so--at least if the past is any indication.

I have been a proponent of WAC programs at Indiana University, the University of Oklahoma, and in speeches to groups of teachers around the country. I have experienced the same rewards and disappointments expressed by so many who have written about their WAC experiences and programs. I have wondered which mix was best of pedagogy, money, institutionalization, insider/outsider control, faculty/administrative support/control, and the host of other problems and questions raised in the literature on WAC. All of this work, all of my time spent with faculty and administrators on WAC problems, and all of my wondering has been useful-educational. But I think my vision has been too narrow, and I fear the lessons of the past which point to the end of all our modern effort on WAC if we do not broaden our perspective.

I think the recent refocus on literacy and the broadening conception of literacy offers us a way out of our historical dilemma. I think people in the WAC movement need to join with people concerned about reading, oral communication, collaborative learning and critical thinking and realize that they are all working on the same problem. However, such joining together may eliminate the need for experts on writing. Usually WAC programs are run by a director of writing or some other expert. The problem with experts is that they take responsibility and others do not have to. Experts supposedly have special knowledge, and almost always have special language and special rituals for success. When they are brought in to help faculty they take responsibility and the faculty does not need to, though often faculty members will take responsibility in varying degrees.

I think programs to promote student learning need to be centered in the faculty and at the same time in the students. We

all have literacy problems, and we can all learn from one another. By using literacy as our focal point we must ask who is the expert? Well, the truth is everyone. No one looks especially to the English department for experts on literacy, though many would pass themselves off as such. Instead, literacy is the province of the people in history, as well as in math, as well as in computer science, or journalism or education or whatever. With literacy as a focus the notion of the expert virtually disappears, and we find ourselves almost back to the situation described in Richard Bullock's paper at Wright College where the faculty, which included the administration in the "old days" sat and talked about things--all were expert.

In a literacy design, then, a coordinator may be necessary, but the coordinator's job is not so much to give expert advice as it is to help find the talents among faculty that will help focus on issues of literacy, issues that include writing but also include collaboration, critical thinking, oral communication and reading. The coordinator in time should become just another voice in collegial dialogues that deal with learning fundamental to all disciplines and all learners. Let me describe what I mean through as example.

Under a Ford Foundation grant the University of Oklahoma has made a concerted effort to help faculty focus on issues of illiteracy and to devise ways of eliminating it. Using the Ford Foundation definition of literacy it set up a two-year pilot plan to involve faculty in finding solutions to problems identified by the faculty members themselves. When the Ford Foundation contacted Dean Robert Hemenway of the College of Arts and Sciences to ask if Oklahoma would submit a proposal he said yes, and immediately contacted faculty in history, political science, English, Afro-American studies, the honors program, minority research, and so forth. This group using the Ford Foundation guidelines met several times and shaped a proposal to improve literacy by focusing first on the three mandated courses in Oklahoma--history, political science and composition. These are courses that all students in Oklahoma's state higher education system must take--all 160,000 undergraduates.

Using the components of literacy outlined by the Ford Foundation six faculty members from history (2), political science (2), and English (2) worked together to create two pilot programs under phase one (summer and first semester) of the project. One group of three faculty (history, political science and English) worked with the same 25 students and coordinated their readings, writing assignments, exams and so forth at weekly meetings after the initial summer planning. All three tried to focus on similar issues and used a variety of activities to promote literacy in their classes. The other group worked within the normal classroom framework of the university. Twenty-four students in the freshman composition course were placed in the same history and political science course. The history course had 220 students in it, and the political science course enrolled a total of 65 students. The faculty member from English attended history and political science

with his freshman students and met frequently with his team members. In his class he had his students form three-member study groups, different three-member revision teams, and he used material from history and political science for discussion, reading, writing, preparing for essay exams, and so forth. His colleague in political science spent considerable time showing students how to read such diverse documents as the Declaration of Independence, the court decisions in Brown vs. the Board of Education, Martin Luther King's Letter from Birmingham Jail, Alexis de Tocqueville's Democracy in America and a host of other readings. This teacher also used frequent, short in-class writing assignments to get students thinking and talking.

All six of these faculty members worked on components of literacy, some obviously more than others. At the end of the semester none of them felt like an expert, though each had experiences and ideas that could be shared in phase two of the program. In the second phase five of these six faculty met with 30 other faculty (who were paid) from art, chemistry, biology, geography, psychology, math, computer science, English, sociology, history, political science, anthropology, history of science, drama, human relations, philosophy and zoology. In the three meetings near the end of the school year and the week-long meeting after school was out these faculty reported the failures and successes of their work together. They also led workshops on reading, collaborative learning, oral communication, writing, interdisciplinary study, and critical thinking. For example, Robert Griswold from history had the 30 faculty read Gordon Wood's "Interests and Disinterestedness in the Making of the Constitution." When they came to our meeting during the week-long workshop he put them in groups and asked them to do the tasks outlined in the appendix at the end of this article. Note how an experienced history teacher used collaboration, writing, close reading, critical thinking and oral communication all in one assignment, and he did not consider himself an expert in any of these activities.

The 30 faculty tried ideas out and brought the results to the meetings and shared them. On the last day (faculty worked in two groups of 15) all 30 faculty brought in plans for how they would incorporate components of literacy instruction into their classes. They ran the session entirely. They handed out materials, explained what they wanted to do, asked questions, answered questions, expressed misgivings and shared their confidence in some approaches and ideas. At the end of this phase there was not one expert from the outside, nor were there five or six experts from the inside, but everybody felt more knowledgable, and felt more expert at working on improving literacy in their classes. Each had taught others in the group, and each in turn had learned from others.

In phase three of this program the 30 faculty will implement their ideas in their classes. They will answer questionnaires, be interviewed, be observed and have a chance in the first semester to assess the program and their own and each other's work in it.

At the same time new general education requirements will be phased into the undergraduate education program. All courses approved by a committee of faculty will begin to be taught across campus. Each of these courses was approved only if components of literacy were included. That means these new courses had to show directly how oral communication, writing, reading and critical thinking had been made a fundamental part of the course. Courses submitted that lacked any of these focuses were sent back to departments for reconsideration and were accompanied by explanations about why the course was rejected and what was needed to make it acceptable.

The overall goal of this work on literacy obviously is to improve undergraduate education by promoting fundamental learning activities that all faculty members can use. The institution does not need an expert on writing to accomplish this goal. Nor does it need an expert on reading, an expert on critical thinking, an expert on collaborative learning, an expert on oral communication. What this institution needs and what other institutions need are faculty members across campus who are aware of these fundamental ways of learning and of shaping the way we think about and create world views. We need faculties that are given time to face these issues together and not with some expert who keeps alive and fosters the insular thinking that weakens the modern university by pretending that an expert can solve our problems when we know that we must solve our own problems--and that we must do so by talking, reading, questioning and writing together. We all need to take the responsibility rather than thinking that one expert inside or outside of our institution will do the job for us.

We cannot depend upon one component of literacy/learning/language to help our students create and shape their views about the world. Writing is important and WAC is important, but if that is solely what we depend on we will see it disappear from basic instruction as it has in the past. Instead we need to emphasize the whole of language literacy, of the power of language in our lives and learning, and by doing so I think we can make our students more thoughtful and intellectually powerful because we will put them back into the center of their education. And we can put them back into the center by having them talk, read, question and write together.

APPENDIX

Part I. Discussion of Wood Essay

Group 1: a.m. Binkley, Comas, Dipper, Doty
p.m. Caldwell, Davis, Farmer, Fink

Your task is to analyze the basic thesis of this article. You must prepare a written statement--one long paragraph should do--in which you present to the class your collective understanding of Wood's central argument.

Group 2: a.m. Regan, Lamb, Lewis, Livesay
p.m. Friend, Harris, Herstand, Hertzke

Your task is to analyze the evidenciary basis of this article. What sources does Wood use in order to make his case? What are the strengths and limitations of the evidence? You must prepare a written statement in which you summarize your collective ideas about the evidence.

Group 3: a.m. Mergler, Neal, Ng, Nussbaum
p.m. Morgan, Neely, Pfiester, St.John

Your task is to analyze the structure--the architecture--of the essay. How is the essay put together? How does it progress? How is the essay assembled? You must present to the class an outline of the essay that enables your fellow students to see at a glance how Wood constructed his piece.

Group 4: a.m. Snell, Toothaker, Zonana
p.m. Stanley, Watson, Whitecotton, Zeman

Your task is to develop 3 or 4 questions or statements that should provoke and sustain considerable class discussion. They may point out some key implications of the article, some issues that Wood touched upon but did not fully explore, some basic problems or failures of the piece, or anything else worthy of class attention.

Part II. Discussion of Slave Advertisements

Each group should discuss the following issues: what kind of documents are these? What is their purpose? What can they tell us about masters? About slaves and slave culture? What are their strengths and weaknesses as historical documents?

Each group has a short writing assignment:

Group 1: What do these documents tell us about the masters?

Group 2: What do these documents tell us about slaves and slave culture?

Group 3: What are the strengths of these documents as historical sources?

Group 4: What are the limitations of these documents as historical sources?